

VZCZCXRO2460
RR RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHRY #1256/01 3251140
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 211140Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY CONAKRY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1893
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CONAKRY 001256

SIPDIS

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12598: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [GV](#)
SUBJECT: EDUCATION MINISTER PLANS TO TEST CONTRACT TEACHERS

REF: CONAKRY 1215

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. During a November 16 poloff courtesy call, the Minister of Education was enthusiastic about his job and optimistic about his program to improve education in Guinea. In response to teacher demands to address contractor problems, the Minister said he plans to hold a national exam to test all teachers with permanent employment to be offered only to those who pass. He also commented on efforts to reduce corruption during the September national university exam process, which resulted in the arrest of a number of teachers and students accused of bribing and cheating. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On November 16, poloff met with Guinean Minister of Education, Elhadj Ousmane Souare. One of two union members represented in Prime Minister Lansana Kouyate's cabinet, Souare was relaxed, informal and eager to dispense with standard protocol. He expressed appreciation for his close working relationship with the Embassy in the past and said he is looking forward to continued collaboration.

BIO NOTES

¶3. (U) Born in 1946, Minister Souare has a degree in physics from the University of Kankan. He completed two post-graduate study programs in France: one on solar energy at the National Center for Scientific Research and one on scientific research management. Minister Souare also spent two years doing specialized training in scientific research policy in Brussels, Geneva and Paris. The minister has extensive experience as a consultant for a number of national and international organizations including UNESCO, the National Committee for the Fight Against AIDS, and the World Bank. His previous government positions include National Coordinator on Women's Civil Rights and Deputy National Director for Scientific and Technical Research.

¶4. (U) As a founding member of the Guinean Teacher's Union (SLEG), Minister Souare actively participated in the union negotiations with the government during the January/February strike. He also has extensive experience in conflict resolution and negotiation and has used this experience to resolve issues within the unions.

BACKGROUND

¶5. (SBU) Severely under-resourced, the Ministry of Education receives less than 5% of Guinea's operating budget (the amount available after debt service payments). Many schools are in deplorable conditions with classrooms designed for 30 students housing more than 150. Inadequate numbers of qualified teachers coupled with corruption pose additional challenges. A 2006 German study found that about 30% of contractual teachers cannot read, write or do math beyond the 4th grade level.

¶6. (SBU) Minister Souare emphasized that U.S. assistance in the education sector is critical to democracy. He said that Guinea's high illiteracy rates (greater than 70%) create a substantial barrier to effective civic education. Souare clarified that while financial assistance is welcome, U.S. assistance in other areas can be just as helpful. Specifically, he said the U.S. plays an important role in democracy advocacy, informal education campaigns, and by providing advice and support to both the government and the private sector. Poloff told the Minister that the Embassy is exploring a number of different ideas to support civic education, including radio bulletins and public outreach to schools and universities.

PUNISHING CORRUPTION

¶7. (SBU) Although the national university exam process has been fraught with corruption in the past, the September 2007 exam results were widely seen as the most transparent in recent memory. Poloff congratulated the minister for his leadership role in administering the exams. Souare, visibly proud, said that corruption within the exam processes will no longer be tolerated. He added that an unspecified number of students and teachers who had been caught cheating or accepting bribes, were currently in jail awaiting trial. Minister Souare emphasized that Guinea's political environment is very different than it was in the past - 'people will no longer accept poor management, abuse or betrayal,' he said. 'We have to aim to satisfy base needs' he added, 'and education is one of those needs.'

CONAKRY 00001256 002 OF 002

AND WEEDING OUT UNQUALIFIED TEACHERS

¶8. (SBU) Regarding ongoing labor problems with teachers (reftel), Souare said that many of the problems are more than 20 years old. A union member himself, he said he understands the underlying issues and had just met with the unions the previous day. The biggest problem is large numbers of teachers employed as contractors, which represent more than half of the total education workforce. These contract workers lack benefits and job security and the employment system invites corruption. Souare said he plans to hold a national exam in December or January to which all contract teachers will be invited. Those teachers who pass the exam will be offered permanent employment no later than March, he said. Souare added that the exam should help weed out unqualified teachers. According to Souare, union members agreed with the proposed solution.

INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES

¶9. (SBU) When asked about efforts to address infrastructure inadequacies, Souare said that he is trying to identify appropriate facilities within the private sector in order to rent them and convert them into schools. However, he added that assistance from donors may be needed to implement this plan.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Despite significant challenges facing the education sector, Minister Souare is energetic and enthusiastic with clear ideas of what needs to be done and how he wants to do it. His success in improving the national university exam process, which was due in part to USG assistance, testifies to his commitment and follow-through. Based on initial impressions, Minister Souare seems to be a willing, pragmatic partner who is looking for assistance but also working to identify what he can do on his own. The Embassy has

been working closely with the Ministry on a number of programs including developing a civic education program to develop a curriculum for the formal school system as well as an informal mass education campaign via radio broadcasts and other mechanisms.

¶11. (SBU) As to Square's plan to hold a national test for contract teachers, it is critical that the exam be well written and well administered because if the Ministry offers permanent employment to unqualified contractors, it risks further crippling the education system for decades. At the same time, ministry refusal to employ long-time contractors based on exam results is likely to be unpopular. END COMMENT.

CARTER